DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 384 733 CE 069 347

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TITLE Characteristics, Educational Preparation, and Membership in Professional Organizations of Agricultural Communicators. Summary of Research 82.
INSTITUTION Ohio State Univ., Columbus. Dept. of Agricultural Education.
PUB DATE 95
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Agricultural Education; *Educational Background; Higher Education; *Individual Characteristics; Journalism; Literature Reviews; *Off Farm Agricultural Occupations; *Participation; *Professional Associations; Public Relations; Secondary Education
IDENTIFIERS *Communications Occupations

ABSTRACT

An exploratory study examined the characteristics and educational preparation of a random sample of 313 agricultural communicators chosen from 1,706 individuals listed as active members of one of the following agricultural communication professional organizations in 1992: American Agricultural Editors' Association, Agricultural Communicators in Education, Agricultural Relations Council, Cooperative Communicators Association, National Association of Agricultural Journalists, and National Association of Farm Broadcasters. Of the 313 individuals mailed survey instruments, 243 (78%) responded. According to the completed survey instruments, the typical agricultural communicator is a Caucasian male, approximately 45 years old, who grew up on a farm but now lives in an area with a population of 10,000 or greater. The average respondent earned $30,000 annually, his primary job responsibility was reporting, he used both agricultural subject matter and communication skills in his work, he was most likely to belong to Agricultural Communicators in Education, and his membership dues were most likely paid by his employer. The study established that current agricultural communicators have very diverse backgrounds, educational experiences, and job descriptions. A continuing lack of consensus about the qualities that yield the best agricultural communicator was also apparent. (Contains 27 references.) (MN)

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Summary of Research

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Characteristics, Educational Preparation, and Membership in Professional Organizations of Agricultural Communicators

Cheryl A. Buck and R. Kirby Barrick

Introduction

Every profession has knowledge and carries out activities that separate it from other professions (Doheny, Cook, & Stopper, 1992). Professional organizations are valuable to the knowledge base, growth, and welfare of any profession, and thus serve as catalysts for the professional growth and development of their members. In addition, the membership and participation of individuals in organizations contribute directly to growth and collective expertise within the profession itself.

A symbiotic relationship exists among a professional organization, its membership, and a profession. The membership should define the purpose and functions of the organization. In return, "the organization provides a structure through which the purpose of the group can be accomplished" (DeYoung, 1981, p. 151). Professional organizations are established to arrange policies and activities of practice within a professional area, and to ensure that activities regarding meeting qualifications of the profession are maintained (Doheny, et al., 1992).

The extent to which a professional organization is considered successful in achieving its purpose is often a reflection of the general welfare of both its members and the profession at large. One factor necessary for a professional organization to achieve its goals is an adequate number of active members (Merton cited in Blais & Frock, 1987; DeYoung, 1981). Ultimately, the caliber of a professional organization can be measured, in part, by the member characteristics, educational preparation, and practices of the collective membership. Therefore, the quality of membership becomes a concern as a professional identity is created for each type of profession.

For example, the position of agricultural communicator is not new to the list of agriculturally related occupations. However, there are no set guidelines regarding the agricultural communicator's purpose in disseminating information about agriculture (Weckman, Quinn, & Witham, 1992). The responsibilities of an agricultural communicator are complex, and they vary according to the type of employment, the educational preparation of the individual, and the range of his or her experiences and special interests.

Several studies have been conducted previously about different groups of agricul-

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tural communicators. Tucker and Paulson (1988) examined characteristics of agricultural communication students in terms of career objectives, interests within agriculture and communication, and opinions about their agricultural communications studies. Bowen and Cooper (1988) asked agricultural communication graduates about their employment history, job satisfaction, and personal qualities. Other studies have examined the opinions of agricultural communication professionals beyond the student and recent graduate levels (Mitchell, 1956; Wilson, Paulson, & Henderson, 1991).

Krikava and Winsor (cited in Bowen & Cooper, 1988) developed a profile of Cooperative Communicators Association (CCA) members, and the Association Research Group (cited in Bowen & Cooper, 1988) identified the most common characteristics of the members of the American Agricultural Editors' Association (AAEA). In addition, a national survey of professional agricultural communicators conducted by Kroupa & Evans (1976) revealed only selected characteristics of some agricultural communicators and their academic course suggestions for agricultural communication students.

While these studies have been valuable for identifying some basic qualities of agricultural communicators, most have also been too selective to allow their results to be applied to the entire field. A lack of comprehensive information about the background of agricultural communicators does not seem to develop a cohesive workforce or a solid foundation of organization members. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a profile that identifies these characteristics of current agricultural communicators, before their perceptions and opinions can be used effectively for professional development.

Review of Related Literature

Professional organizations exist to provide members with opportunities to: network with others in the profession; influence the goals of the profession; speak and publish; and increase awareness of information in professional journals. Organizations also provide social and moral support for the members and for their work (Anderson, D'Amicantonio, and DuBois, 1992; DeYoung, 1981; Kearl, 1983; Merton, cited in Blais & Frock, 1987; Scott, 1980).

Agricultural communication professional organizations are similar in their purposes. Kearl (1983) reported that agricultural communicators use professional organizations as "our channel for reviewing our work, improving our skills, and selecting and developing the capacities of our successors" (p. 4).

Agricultural communication has been a professional field in the United States for approximately 100 years (Kearl, 1983). Hopke (1987) stated that "the agricultural communications field includes professionals who combine (1) knowledge of agriculture, (2) skills in communications, and (3) interest in working with people" (p. 77).

Research shows that agricultural communication began in earnest in the early 1800s, as agriculture outgrew the ability to pass information by word-of-mouth. Kearl (1983) suggested that agricultural communication developed when scientists needed help responding to questions and information requests. Lionberger and Gwin (1982) said the United States agricultural college and extension system developed to fulfill a need for scientific information that could improve farming efforts.

College courses in agricultural communication began in the early 1900s, and they have existed under various names since then. Reisner (1990) found that, as of 1988, undergraduate degrees in agricultural journalism and agricultural communication were available at 26 universities in the United States. Several offered master's degrees in some combination of agriculture and communications. One school offered a doctoral program in mass communication. However, Evans and Bolick (1982) discovered in 1982 that most programs of education in agricultural journalism and communication were less than 20 years old.

Early agricultural editors worked to change the stereotyped image of agriculture through public relations (Kearl, 1983). Today, as the general public's direct contact with agriculture on farms diminishes, there is much public dialogue about issues related to agriculture such as food prices, healthfulness of food, land use, water use, animal rights, and pollution. Agriculture still needs a strong public relations program (Evans, 1984).

An agricultural communicator's responsibility is to determine what information about agriculture is needed by each of many different audiences, and then develop ways to present that information (Agunga, 1989; Singh, 1976; Teller, 1980). This responsibility requires the communicator's involvement in all stages of the communication process, and the types of skills needed varies greatly.

Previous studies of agricultural communicators (Boone, 1991; Bowen & Cooper, 1988; Evans & Bolick, 1982; Hillgren, 1989; Kroupa & Evans, 1973, 1976; Mitchell, 1956; Reisner, 1990, 1991; Weckman, Quinn, & Witham, 1992; Wilson, Paulson, & Henderson, 1991) have revealed many opinions and practices regarding the necessary, proper education and training for agricultural communicators.

For example, Mitchell (1956) said there was no consensus among employers of agricultural journalists and communicators about the best educational background for this career. Both Mitchell and Clyde Duncan (cited in Evans & Bolick, 1982) did find that professionals recommended more coursework in agriculture than in journalism and other areas.

Kroupa and Evans (1973) found, in a study of several agricultural communication organizations, that the only communication courses recommended as critically important were: news writing, feature writing, editing, and photography. They also said some respondents seemed to feel that coursework lags behind changes in agricultural technology, meaning on-the-job experience is better for keeping up in the industry. In 1976, Kroupa and Evans recommended that agricultural coursework be required, but the student should choose the specific course subject matter.

Reisner's (1990) review of several agricultural communication curriculum surveys revealed beliefs opposite the findings of Mitchell (1956) and Duncan (cited in Evans & Bolick, 1982). Reisner (1990) reported that professionals agreed that courses in communication skills, communication systems, or human relations were more important that agricultural communications systems and agricultural subject matter courses. However, Reisner (1990) did find, like Mitchell (1956), that employers of agricultural communicators consider experience in both mass communication media and agriculture helpful.

Boone (1991) discovered that graduate programs in agricultural communication are recommended by both academicians and leading agricultural communicators. However, Boone noted that technical skills and subject matter in agriculture were rated as far less important than communication skills for graduate study.

Wilson, Paulson, and Henderson (1991) reported that members of the Agricultural Communicators in Education believed both communication and agricultural subject matter should be included in graduate studies for agricultural communicators.

Overall, the variations in the preparation of agricultural communicators can be seen most readily in the wide range of types of career training for agricultural communicators and in their levels of education (Weckman, Quinn, & Witham, 1992). Usually, agricultural communication students have degrees that require some combination of agricultural courses and journalism or communication courses (Evans & Bolick, 1982; Hopke, 1987).

Of the respondents to Mitchell's (1956) study about the background and qualifications of agricultural communicators, 47 percent had farm experience or background, 41 percent had experience with mass communications media, 35 percent had agricultural college training, and 35 percent had journalism or communication training. Some of the respondents fit into more than one of these categories.

While studying the employment of agricultural communication graduates more than 30 years later, Bowen and Cooper (1988) found that all of their respondents were white, and most (70 percent) were females. A bachelor's degree was the highest degree for 91 percent of the respondents. Also, 41 percent of all respondents were 30 to 39 years old, and another one-third were 25 to 29 years old. The most common positions held were in business/marketing, public relations, and writing/editing. Twenty-two percent of the respondents made less than $15,000 per year, and 13 percent made $50,000 or more per year.

Krikava and Winsor (cited in Bowen & Cooper, 1988) found that the average member of the Cooperative Communicators Association (CCA) at that time was mostly likely to be a 38-year-old male, have a bachelor's degree in communications, journalism or English, and earn approximately $32,000. They also found that male CCA members earned annual salaries that were 41 percent higher than those of female CCA members.

A study by the Association Research Group (cited in Bowen & Cooper, 1988) for the American Agricultural Editors' Association (AAEA) provided information about yet another group of professional agricultural communicators. Seventy-seven percent of the respondents for the AAEA study were males, and 40 percent of all respondents were 30 to 39 years old. The average salary was $37,580 per year, while salaries ranged from $13,500 to $110,000. Like Krikava and Winsor's results (cited in Bowen & Cooper, 1988), females usually earned lower salaries than the males.

Weckman, Quinn, and Witham (1992) said that, in a study of the communicators listed in the USDA Directory of Land Grant Communicators, one-fourth of the respondents had only a bachelor's degree, while 56 percent had a bachelor's degree and a master's degree. Approximately 10 percent had doctoral degrees. More than half of the respondents said an advanced degree is important in this type of work. Also, 70 percent said a background in communications was very important in agricultural

communication. The respondents were involved in the processing of information, in using technical skills, and in communications planning.

The results of these various studies reveal that agricultural communicators are a diverse population, both in background, personal qualities, and work environment.

Purpose and Research Objectives

The purpose of this exploratory study was to determine selected characteristics and the educational preparation of agricultural communicators who are members of six agricultural communication professional organizations. The study also sought to identify the membership of these agricultural communicators in professional organizations outside of agricultural communication.

The following objectives were addressed:

1. To describe agricultural communication organization members on the following demographic characteristics:
   A. Number of years worked in the field of agricultural communication;
   B. Membership(s) in the six agricultural communication organizations associated with this study;
   C. Officer position(s) held in agricultural communication organizations;
   D. Salary Range;
   E. Residence;
   F. Age;
   G. Gender; and
   H. Ethnicity.
2. To describe the type and level of educational preparation of agricultural communicators according to the following items:
   A. Academic degree(s) attained;
   B. Academic major(s) in college; and
   C. Emphasis of educational preparation anchored in:
      (i) agricultural subject matter;
      (ii) communication skills subject matter; or
      (iii) alternative educational experiences.
3. To identify the membership of agricultural communicators in professional organizations outside of agricultural communication.
4. To determine the job titles and job responsibilities of agricultural communicators.

Methodology

Population And Sample

The target population was the current members of the following six agricultural communication professional organizations: American Agricultural Editors' Association (AAEA); Agricultural Communicators in Education (ACE); Agricultural Relations Council (ARC); Cooperative Communicators Association (CCA); National Association of Agricultural Journalists (NAAJ); and National Association of Farm Broadcasters (NAFB). The most recent directory of each of the organizations was used to update a master list of all names and addresses originally compiled by the planners of the 1992 United States Agricultural Communicators Congress. The names of all persons with mailing addresses outside the United States were deleted from the list, along with the names of all organizations other than the six in this study. The list was alphabetized, duplicate names were deleted, and a random sample of 313 was chosen from the 1,706 names on the final population list. The sample names were selected using a computer random function command. Random selection of study participants ensured no sampling bias. The sample size was determined from the "Table for Determining Sample Size from a Given Population" provided by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). The

researchers accepted the possibility of a 5 percent margin of error for this study.

Instrumentation

The survey instrument, a questionnaire developed by the researchers, contained questions about selected characteristics, educational preparation, and membership in professional organizations of agricultural communicators. The questions were designed to provide responses for each objective of the study. The demographic data were used to build a brief profile of today's professional agricultural communicator. Socio-demographic information about the respondents' background and personal characteristics was considered important as a basis for the profile. Other questions expanded the profile and requested information about the educational and professional preparation of the current agricultural communicators. Information also was requested about the communicators' current jobs, including data about job titles, responsibilities, and activities. In addition, respondents were asked to list their membership(s) in professional organizations.

Data Collection

Procedures recommended by Dillman (1978) for mail surveys were used for conducting the data collection. Questionnaires were mailed to the sample population. Each questionnaire contained an identification code number for nonrespondent follow-up. A reminder notice and second copy of all materials were sent to nonrespondents, and a final postcard reminder was mailed to the remaining nonrespondents.

The number of usable responses from the random sample of 313 active organization members was 243, 78 percent. The data obtained through these responses were coded and analyzed using Microsoft Excel v. 3.00 and SPSS v. 4.0 computer software. Results of the data analysis were reported in frequencies and percentages. Responses to open-ended questions on the questionnaire were synthesized into lists of membership patterns and educational preparation patterns held by the agricultural communicators. Because of testing for nonresponse error by randomly sampling and surveying nonrespondents by telephone, this study can be generalized to apply to all the members of the six agricultural communication professional organizations named in this study.

Validity and Reliability

A panel of experts from The Ohio State University examined the questions on the survey questionnaire for content and face validity. Several questions were rewritten to correct interval lengths, enhance clarity, and ensure that appropriate forms of answers were given by the respondents.

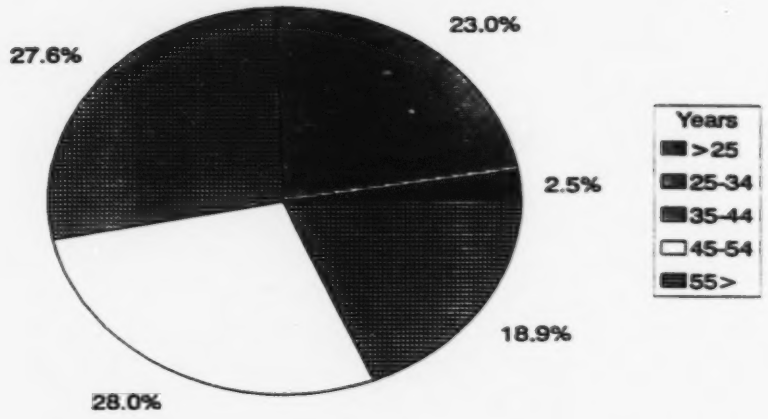
A pilot test was conducted to determine the reliability of the questionnaire using a test-retest reliability coefficient as a form of internal consistency (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 1990). A random sample of agricultural communicators was selected from the population list after the selection of the study sample. The average reliability coefficient for the pilot test was 93.4 percent agreement. The highest coefficient was 100 percent agreement for eleven of the questions. The lowest coefficient was 56 percent agreement for one question.

Findings

A Demographic Profile

Of all the respondents, 94.2 percent were Caucasian males. More than half of the respondents, 63.4 percent, were males. The most common age groups were people

Figure 1: Age



aged 35 to 44 years old and 45 to 54 years old. See Figure 1. Most of the respondents, 40.9 percent, grew up in a rural, farm situation. However, almost 75 percent of them currently live in a small city or a more populated area, all with populations of 10,000 or more people.

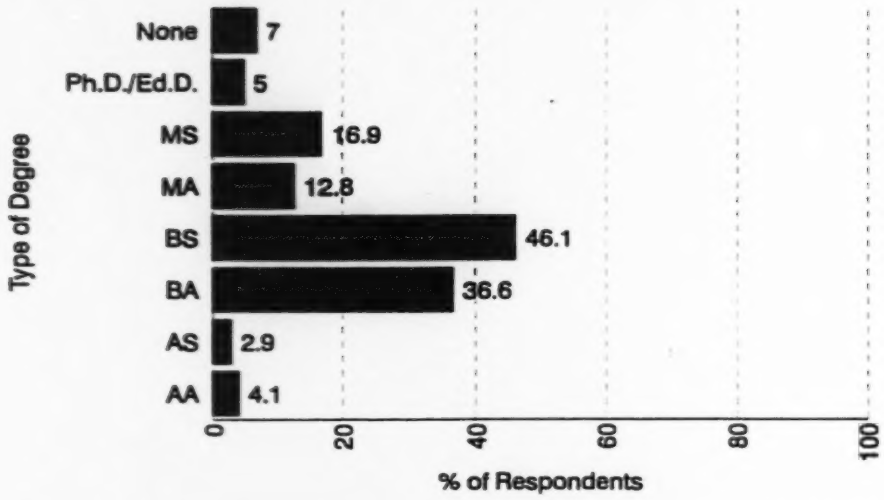
More than one-third of the respondents had been a communicator for more than 20 years; and another 10 percent had been a communicator for 17 to 20 years. Overall, only 4.2 percent had been a communicator for less than five years. On the other hand, only one-fourth of the respondents had been an agricultural communicator for more than 20 years. See Figure 2. Also, 20.8 percent had been an agricultural communicator for less than five years.

Educational Preparation

In terms of educational background, 93 percent of the respondents had at least one college degree. The types of degrees represented included the Associate of Arts, Associate of Science, Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science, Master of Arts, Master of Science, Ph.D., Ed.D., and MBA degrees. See Figure 3. A variety of majors represented each of these degrees, although English, journalism, and agricultural journalism were the most commonly cited majors for the BA, BS, MA, and MS. Almost one-third of

Figure 2: Years as an Agricultural Communicator

Figure 3: Degrees



the respondents had earned at least one graduate degree; 5 percent of those included a Ph.D. or an Ed.D.

A Job Description

More than one-fifth, 20.9 percent, of the 234 people who answered the question about salary earned $20,000 to 29,999 per year. The $30,000 to 39,999 range and the $60,000 or more range were the next most cited, at 20.1 percent each. Only 6.4 percent of the respondents made less than $20,000 per year. Job titles varied also. There were 171 different titles listed; 31 of the titles were listed by more than one person. The two most common titles named were Editor and Farm Director.

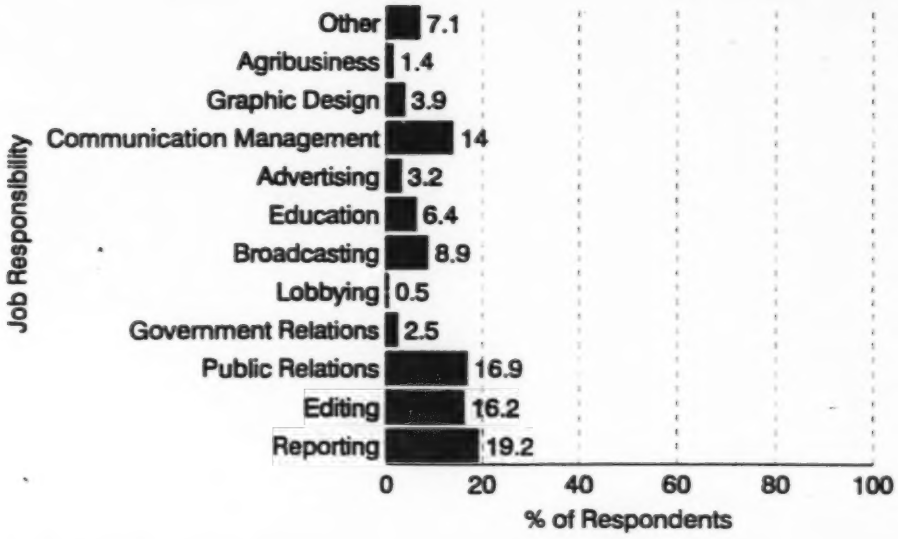
Reporting was cited the most often as a primary job responsibility, with 19.2 percent of the responses. Public relations was the second most common job responsibility (16.9 percent of the responses), and editing was the third most common duty (16.2 percent). See Figure 4.

Professional Organization Memberships

Respondents were asked to identify the organization – of all those they belonged to – which was most valuable to their work as an agricultural communicator. Agricultural Communicators in Education was ranked the most valuable organization to 29.4 percent of those who responded to the question, and another 23.3 percent identified the American Agricultural Editors' Association as the organization most valuable to them. The third organization cited as most valuable by the respondents was actually a variety of organizations besides the six named in this study. The National Association of Farm Broadcasters was cited fourth most often, the Cooperative Communicators Association fifth, the National Association of Agricultural Journalists sixth, and the Agricultural Relations Council seventh.

More than half of the respondents, 55.2 percent, said both agricultural subject matter knowledge and communication skills knowledge were equally important in their

Figure 4: Primary Job Responsibilities



work. An additional 42.7 percent of the respondents said communication skills knowledge was most important in their work. Only 2.1 percent said agricultural subject matter knowledge was most important.

Most of the respondents were not familiar with the Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (ACT) student organization. Almost half of those who did have ACT on their campus had joined the chapter; and 68.2 percent of those members then had held local ACT offices. Only 6.7 percent of those who were ACT members were national ACT officers.

Membership in the six agricultural communication organizations in the study was varied; no significant pattern emerged representing the respondents. See Table 1. Overall, more of the respondents, 39 percent, belonged to Agricultural Communicators in Education than to each of the other five organizations. Also, the number of years of membership in each organization varied from person to person, in a range from one year to 50 years.

Sixteen percent of all the respondents said they were members of one, two, or three additional agricultural communication organizations. Most of the businesses of the agricultural communicators in this study pay the dues for their employees to be a member of agricultural communication professional organizations, although 33.6 percent said their employers do not pay any dues for such membership. More than half of the respondents, 55.6 percent, also belong to at least one outside professional organization. The six most frequently noted outside organizations were: Public Relations

TABLE 1

AGRICULTURAL COMMUNICATION ORGANIZATION MEMBERSHIP

Organization	% of Respondents
ACE	39.0%
ARC	8.6%
AAE	27.2%
CCA	14.8%
NAAJ	7.0%
NAFB	20.2%

Society of America; International Association of Business Communicators; Women in Communications; National Agri-Marketing Association; Society of Professional Journalists (Sigma Delta Chi); and Epsilon Sigma Phi (the Extension Professional Society). The National Agri-Marketing Association was listed by the respondents as both an additional agricultural communication professional organization and as an outside professional organization not related to agricultural communication.

Summary, Conclusions, Recommendations

Summary of Findings

The typical agricultural communicator in this study was a Caucasian male, approximately 45 years old, who grew up on a farm, but now lives in an area with a population of 10,000 or more people. This person has been a communicator and an agricultural communicator for 20 years and has earned a bachelor's degree in English, journalism, or agricultural journalism. The respondent's average salary is $30,000, the primary job responsibility is reporting, and both agricultural subject matter and communication skills knowledge are utilized at work. The average agricultural communicator is most likely to belong to Agricultural Communicators in Education, with the membership dues paid by his or her employer. The average respondent was not familiar with the Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow student organization during college, and even now is not a member of any agricultural communication professional organizations beyond the six named in this study. However, the typical agricultural communicator is a member of at least one outside professional organization.

Several appendices were developed to provide a comprehensive summary of some characteristics of the agricultural communicators who responded to this study. The appendices included lists of the respondents' majors in college – by degree level, job titles, and offices held in agricultural communication organizations. The names of the other agricultural communication organizations (besides the six in this study) and additional professional organizations to which the respondents belonged were also listed. Another summary indicated the reasons why certain organizations were considered the most valuable to individuals. Additional comments from the respondents – about the agricultural communication industry in general – were also included in the appendices.

Conclusions

This study attempted to develop a more comprehensive profile of agricultural communicators than has existed to date. The results of this study show that current agricultural communicators in agricultural communication professional organizations have a variety of backgrounds and educational experiences. Most agricultural communicators have some type of college degree, and many have advanced degrees. The respondents indicated more degrees with majors in journalism, English, and agricultural communication than any other majors. However, the range of majors for all the degrees included a mixture of topics and levels of degrees that reflect continuing uncertainty about exactly what type of education is best for an agricultural communicator.

The types of personal backgrounds of agricultural communicators, as well as their job descriptions, also indicate a continuing lack of consensus about the qualities that yield the best agricultural communicator. One example is the ongoing dialogue about whether knowledge in agricultural subject matter is more important than communication skills or vice versa. This study shows that there is no uniform description of an agricultural communicator. If anything, agricultural communicators have become more diversified in nature. For example, majors in college, job responsibilities, and professional organization memberships are greatly varied

among the respondents to this study.

Some of the respondents even said they did not consider themselves to be agricultural communicators, despite their membership(s) in such organizations. However, the organizations in this study remain "agricultural" communication-related in nature, and each is specialized to appeal to certain practitioners. This characteristic, as well as the large number of different organizations listed by the respondents, leads to two questions. Does specialization "lock out" some potential members of each organization, agricultural communication-related or not? Secondly, are current members receiving all they need to help them perform their jobs well?

Direct application to a respondent's job was cited often as the reason why a particular organization was the most valuable. Other reasons given for rating certain organizations as most valuable included: professional networking, contacts; workshops and meetings for information exchange, speakers; and targeted focus to profession. On the other hand, some respondents identified no organization as most valuable to them because of the organizations' lack of impact, or because the respondents needed a variety of organizations to get all the support they needed to do their jobs well. No attempt was made in this study to establish a pattern of employer support for organizational activities and their effect on a communicator's work.

Although previous studies have been conducted, they have concentrated only on specific types of agricultural communicators such as current students, recent agricultural communication graduates, and some members of individual agricultural communication organizations. This research studied a more diverse group of those in the agricultural communication field. With this summary of the basic nature and characteristics of agricultural communicators, other researchers can study the relationship between membership in professional organizations and effectiveness within a profession.

Recommendations for Further Study

This study provided baseline data to help determine issues in agricultural communication for future consideration. Several items have been identified as needing further study, and they are listed below.

1. Separate the six organizations of this study and do the same study on a more intensive level in each organization. This would provide a more thorough description of the members of each individual organization, as a method of comparison to agricultural communication organization members as a whole.
2. Develop additional studies to examine the reasons why agricultural communicators join other agricultural communication organizations and other professional organizations. A quantitative study could correlate results about which types of agricultural communicators (in terms of background, educational training, job description) join which types of organizations.
3. Develop a qualitative study to examine agricultural communicators' opinions about all the different types of professional organizations.
4. Conduct a study of non-members of agricultural communication organizations to compare with the results of this study. Are the backgrounds, educational training, and job descriptions similar or different between the two groups? Why are some people not members of such organizations?
5. Examine the existence and locations of chapters of the Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (ACT) and the promotion of ACT activities on the various campuses. Look for any correlations between ACT membership and agricultural communication professional organization membership after college.
6. Examine employer support of agricultural communication professional organizations. This could be done in part by examining the dues payments that are paid by employers for such organizations.

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SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

Professional organizations are valuable to the knowledge base, growth, and welfare of any profession, and thus serve as a catalyst for the professional growth and development of their members. The caliber of a professional organization can be measured, in part, by the member characteristics, educational preparation, and practices of the collective membership. In the agricultural communication field, there is a lack of comprehensive information about the background and educational preparation of the members of the organization. This exploratory study examines selected characteristics and the educational preparation of agricultural communicators who are members of six agricultural communications professions. It should be of interest to agricultural communication and agricultural education faculty.

This summary is based on a thesis by Cheryl A. Buck under the direction of R. Kirby Barrick. Cheryl Buck was a graduate student in the Department of Agricultural Education at The Ohio State University. Dr. R. Kirby Barrick is Professor and Chair of the Department of Agricultural Education. Special appreciation is due to Donald D. Peasley, Cornell University; Blannie E. Bowen, The Pennsylvania State University; Laura Casari, University of Nebraska-Lincoln; and Larry Whiting, The Ohio State University for their critical review of the manuscript prior to publication.

Research has been an important function of the Department of Agricultural Education since it was established in 1917. Research conducted by the Department has generally been in the form of graduate theses, staff studies, and funded research. It is the purpose of this series to make useful knowledge from such research available to practitioners in the profession. Individuals desiring additional information on this topic should examine the references cited.

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